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Witch Doctors and Charms

By

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SINCE the night King Saul visited the witch of Endor, until the present time, belief in witchcraft, in the powers of the unseen world, has not ceased. On every continent, in every clime, even in our own New England it has had its day of power, but in Africa alone has it usurped the power and place of God.

In all pagan Africa the power of the witch-doctor and charms is supreme. Every crisis, yes, every day's round of toil is affected by it.

Let us not be hasty to censure the African for his credulity. He has had many reasons for fearing that mysterious power.

So universal is the use of the charm, or fetich, that it has given its name to the religion of the country — Fetichism. The fetich, or charm, is made of various substances, a vile mixture, worse than the brew of Shakespeare's witches, but always called "medicine," and trusted in to guard against evil and to bring to the owner coveted good. It may be any material object, a stick, stone, bone or rag, but must be "consecrated" by the *oganga* or witch-doctor. This consecration is supposed to lure into the chosen article a spirit which will thereafter inhabit the fetich and protect the owner.

Articles having cavities, such as snail shells, nut shells or the horns of small animals, are most convenient. In the preparation of the charm its object is always kept in view. Ashes of medicinal plants, portions of the bodies and excreta of animals and human beings are in the compound. Chalk mixed with brain matter from the body of some renowned person or an ancestor, is eagerly sought after to give wisdom. The eyeballs of enemies or white people are greatly prized.

The teeth or whiskers of lions and leopards give courage. For an elephant hunter the tip of an elephant's tusk is added, and for endurance the bones of a tortoise. To cure backache the spinal bones of a snake are used; and so with heathen mystery and ceremony, the fetich is completed.

When the object is to bewitch or harm another, the fetich must contain something from the person of the one to be "witched," the nail parings, a clipping from the hair, or, best of all, a drop of blood is sought." (This same belief is prevalent in the south of India.) To avoid danger, nail parings are carefully destroyed and the hair must be cut by a friend.

Should a fetich fail to work the desired result, the witch-doctor has two reasons to suggest: either some direction has been neglected or the enemy had a fetich with a stronger spirit. In either case he is ready — for a consideration — to repair this fetich, or weave a stronger spell about a new one.

What the idol is to the Hindu that the fetich is to the African. The worship is somewhat similar. Both spring from the same motive, — that of fear, but the fetich worshipper has no thought of altering his future condition; his thought is restricted entirely to the present life.

In the villages a small hut is built for such fetiches as are not kept in the dwellings. Here offerings of food are made. On special occasions

a fowl with its blood, or — in time of threatened danger — a goat, is sacrificed. Among the Barotsi, in South Africa, a child is sacrificed. In Dahomey and Ashanti, until 1897, a very carnival of murder marked the time of special offerings to the spirits. The city of Kumassi was named the "Death Place." The fetich trees were soaked to the roots with the blood of victims, of whom there were hundreds. Prayer has, indeed, a small part in the worship, but it is quite overshadowed by the sacrificial element.

So closely interwoven are the two that it is difficult to say whether fetichism is a part of witchcraft or witchcraft a part of fetichism. Both are offensive and defensive. That practised for protection is called by Dr. Nassau the "white art"; that to afflict others, the "black art."

The white art includes many superstitions on a par with seeing the moon over your right shoulder, such as, the concocting of charms to frighten away garden thieves; to make the garden grow; to ensure a safe journey; and, most important of all, to treat the sick.

Witch-doctors often wrought cures by their medicines and herein lies much of their influence. Disease is thought to be the presence of an evil spirit, which can only be driven out by the witch-doctor, with medicine and incantations. While the medicines are sometimes of healing herbs and leaves, their use is never disassociated from the heathen ceremonies. The drumming, dancing and brewing, and the hideous garb of the doctor, are all necessary to drive out the spirit.

But the black art — demonology — is the curse and scourge of Africa to-day and in its practice the witch-doctor is more to be feared than a pestilence or an army. In all parts of Africa the belief obtains that the witch-doctor may bewitch at will. In some tribes it is enough to scatter medicine in the pathway of an enemy, and such is the doctor's knowledge of subtle poisons that

y not be all superstition. Witching is in cases simply murder by poison.

ut the stronghold of the witch-doctor's power not in bewitching but in "smelling out" those who practice the black art by making charms. This power he uses without hindrance.

Every natural death in Africa is laid to witchcraft and straightway the guilty person or persons must be hunted out. For every natural death from one to two deaths are caused in the witch trials that follow.

Again, a person has only to accuse another of "witching," to bring about a witch palaver and trial by the poison cup. Sometimes whole villages are involved and the death rate is appalling. Some native kings have annual trials of their soldiery by the "smellers out" and no man whose loyalty is doubted by the king or the witch-doctor escapes instant death. The mortality from this cause alone is estimated to reach 4,000,000 annually. One of the strange features of this terrible practice is the fact that those who demand the execution of "witches" themselves practice the black art.

Another development of fetichism is the secret society, which is in a sense a government. The society is a huge fraud participated in by the men of a village. Women, slaves and children are forbidden to know its mysteries. It may interfere in feuds, and frequently orders, and enforces, a boycott against offending traders or missionaries. The edicts of the society are given in a loud voice by the spirit "Ukuko" and woe to the person who dares say that "Ukuko" is a man.

Could anything be added to make darker and more hopeless the night of paganism? Fear, constant, ever present fear, sorrow, pain and death, are without a shred of comfort, a ray of hope until Christ come, the day dawn and the shadows flee away.

Adapted from "Fetichism in West Africa," Nassua.